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ABSTRACT

A study assessed the status of the undergraduate communication theory course at small and large colleges. An investigation of communication theory course descriptions (offered by 261 communication programs) found that the course is taught at both small and large colleges, but there is little general agreement about what should be covered in the communication theory course beyond a general survey of major theories. Findings suggest that there is little by way of a common core of knowledge that communication students receive in the undergraduate theory course. (Two tables of data are included; 15 references are attached.) (RS)

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A Rose is a Rose but an Undergraduate Communication Theory Course at Small and Large Colleges is...

Along with the emergence of the communication discipline has come continued discussion on the state of scientific inquiry in the discipline (c.f., Berger, 1991; Berger & Chaffee, 1987; Dervin, Grossberg, O'Keefe, & Wartella, 1989ab; Ferment, 1983). One aspect of that discussion has been the status of theory and research methods instruction in the discipline. Smitter and MacDoniels (1985), in their survey of undergraduate communication curricula at sixty-one small colleges, found that few upper division courses were required, only ten programs required any sort of upper division theory course and little similarity existed among the theory courses that were offered. Smitter and MacDoniels (1985) suggested the development of a common core of requirements that all majors enrolled at a small college should take with uniformity in both course titles and course descriptions. The 1985 Hope College Essential Curriculum Conference further recommended that theory and research methods be the capstone courses in a small college communication curriculum. The Speech Communication Association (1991) has also suggested that theory, research and methodology courses be part of a basic introduction to communication. There is some evidence that these recommendations have been adopted.

Frey and Botan (1988) conducted a survey on the status of instruction in introductory undergraduate communication research methods courses. They concluded that the course is rapidly growing and that there is general agreement about the purpose,

content, problems and plans for it. While no equivalent attempt has been made, to date, to systematically assess the status of instruction in the undergraduate communication theory course, there are contrary views on the status of theory instruction.

One view is that communication theory instruction is alive and well and growing. The SCA (1991) reports that nineteen percent of the new academic positions created during the late 1980s were Communication Theory positions. Frey and Botan (1988: 250) state in the rationale for their study that, "Graduate students typically receive instruction in both communication theory and research methods. At the undergraduate level, however, the preponderance of communication theory, as compared to research methods, texts and chapters ..." Both the SCA (1981) report and Frey and Botan's (1988) observations suggest that theory instruction has increased. The Smitter and MacDoniels' (1985) study and more recent comments by Berger (1991), however, suggest a lack of theory instruction. Berger (1991) attempted to identify some reasons and palliatives for the lack of theory in the communication field. One reason he cited is the imbalance between the large number of research methods courses compared to the small number of theory construction courses being taught at a graduate level. This imbalance results in a preoccupation with methodology and a lack of familiarity with even the basic notions of theory and theory construction. One possible palliative Berger suggests is making instruction in theory development an integral part of the graduate experience. Such instruction would not focus on various substantive theories relevant to communication inquiry but on explanation of key concepts,

alternative approaches to the explanation of communication action, explication of theoretical constructs, and theory construction and evaluation (Berger, 1991:109). One interpretation of Berger's remarks is that an undergraduate theory course should focus on various substantive theories and a graduate theory course on concepts, approaches, explications, construction and evaluation.

While the undergraduate research methods course is growing and congealing, the status of communication theory instruction remains unclear. There are contradictory views on the status of theory instruction/courses, one study of small college communication theory courses and no systematic investigation of theory instruction/courses at larger colleges. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to systematically determine the current status of instruction in the undergraduate general (as opposed to rhetorical, mass communication) communication theory course at U.S. colleges and universities. More specifically, the following questions were investigated:

1. How many communication programs are currently offering communication theory courses?
2. At what level is the communication theory course offered?
2. Is the communication theory course a required course?
3. Is there consistency in the use of course titles?
4. What content is covered in the communication theory course?
5. What are the objectives for the communication theory course?
6. Is there a difference between small and large colleges in course offerings, course titles, required courses, course content, and course objectives?

PROCEDURE AND SAMPLE ANALYSIS

To obtain catalogue descriptions for communication programs, all of the colleges and universities listed in the 1991 SCA Directory AND listed in the Career Guidance Foundation College Catalogue Collection were investigated. This procedure produced an initial corpus of 619 communication programs. Of these 619 communication programs, 261 offered a communication theory course. For each of the 261 communication programs, seven categories of information were recorded; school name, school enrollment, number of full time faculty in the program, course number, course level, course name, required course, and the course description.

Designation of a college as small or large was based on the number of full time faculty in the program and the school enrollment. Seventy-six schools were designated as small with enrollments of 3000 or below or fewer than six full-time faculty in the communication program. One hundred and eighty-five schools were designated as large with enrollments of 3001 or above or more than seven full time faculty members in the communication program.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The current study found that forty-two percent of the communication programs offered an undergraduate communication theory course. Thirty-six percent of the larger colleges and twenty-one percent of the smaller colleges offered an undergraduate communication theory course. In their 1985 study Smitter and MacDoniels found that sixteen percent of the small

college communication programs offered a theory course. For the smaller colleges, the current study shows a five percent increase compared to the 1985 Smitter and MacDoniels' study. The small increase is encouraging and perhaps even more encouraging since the small college category contains both programs with majors and programs that offer a small number of service courses. If only smaller schools with communication majors were studied, the percentage increase may be even larger.

There are several possible explanations for why the undergraduate theory course is offered at only thirty-six percent of the larger colleges. Eleven percent of the larger colleges offered upper level communication theory courses for both undergraduate and graduate credit. Other large colleges offered no undergraduate communication theory courses but offered a communication theory course as one of the first graduate courses. Rather than offering a general communication theory course, other programs offered theory courses in one or more communication areas; Interpersonal Communication Theory, Small Group Theory, and/or Persuasion Theory. Finally, some colleges offered communication theory courses that were specific to major tracks or program focus; Film Theory, Mass Media Theory, and/or Rhetorical Theory.

Together, the 261 communication departments offered 282 undergraduate communication theory courses. Thirty-two percent of the communication programs offered only lower level communication theory course(s). Sixty percent of the communication programs offered only upper division communication theory course(s). The remaining eight percent of the

communication programs offered at least one communication theory course at both the lower and upper levels.

Eighty-nine percent of the small and sixty-three percent of the large colleges required the communication theory course for their majors. These results suggest that when communication programs did add a communication theory course to their curriculums they required it for their majors. Together the increased offerings and the major requirement demonstrate that the communication theory course has increasingly become a core curricular course in communication programs.

The course titles showed that the majority of the communication theory courses were titled some version of "Communication Theory": small colleges (78%) and large colleges (75%). Another sixteen and seventeen percent, respectively, were titled "Communication and Rhetorical Theory", "Communication Theory and Research Methods", and "Principles, Foundations, or Fundamentals of Communication Theory". The remaining courses had titles like "Communication Inquiry", "Introduction to Communication", "Introduction to Communication Studies", and "Historical Perspectives". Five percent of the courses combined both communication and rhetorical theory and five percent of the courses combined both communication theory and research methods. Seven percent of the titles indicated that communication programs offered advanced courses. There does appear to be consistency in the course titles used for the communication theory course. Whether the course was an introduction, survey, or seminar; seventy five percent or more of the time, communication theory

was the common, descriptive term. The remaining course titles have a greater diversity.

For both small and large colleges the rank order of course objectives was the same. For fifty-five percent of the course descriptions, the objective of survey or study was listed; for twenty-six percent, application and for nineteen percent, analysis. These results suggest that the primary objective of the undergraduate communication theory course was to provide a basic survey of or familiarity with communication theory. When the course objective was application, the application was to communication problems and corrections, the literature and research in the field or to communication career and professions. Few of the communication theory courses had analysis as an objective. The primary objective of the undergraduate communication theory course was to survey or study major theories/theorists followed by application and finally analysis.

The rank order of the twenty topics mentioned in the course descriptions by small and large colleges is presented in Table 1. The rankings for the two sizes of colleges are quite similar (within one to three rankings of each other) with the exception of the topics ranked sixteenth to twentieth. Topics that are ranked from sixteenth to twentieth are mentioned in the course descriptions for the larger colleges but not in the course descriptions for the smaller colleges. Given the small differences in the two rankings, Table 2 lists the rank order of the twenty topics determined by the number of course descriptions that mentioned the area. Four general content areas were identified.

Table 1
Topics by the frequency of inclusion in course descriptions and by size of institution

Topics	College Size	
	Small College	Large College
Major theories	13	52
Contexts/areas	17	41
Orientations	20	37
Contemporary	19	37
Models	6	19
Issues	4	20
Nature construction	6	16
Classical	6	15
Major concepts	8	13
Evaluation	8	19
History	5	12
Research skills	5	10
Nature	4	5
Function	4	5
Elements	2	5
Research trends	-	4
Trends	4	-
Themes	-	3
Theory construction	-	2
Overview discipline	-	1

The most frequently mentioned topic was major theories. The theories that were mentioned were more likely to be contextual than thematic, and more contemporary than classical. Communication theorists were mentioned only twice and those two mentions were in the communication and rhetorical theory courses. According to the course descriptions, the major focus of the communication theory course was on communication theories. Second, communication theory course descriptions mention, in rank order: models, nature of theory building, concepts, nature of theory, functions of theory, and theoretical elements. The focus

in this area is definitional concerns.

Table 2
Ranking of topics by frequency of inclusion in course descriptions

Rank Order	Topics	Frequency
1	Major theories	65
2	Theories in contexts	58
3	Orientations to theory	57
4	Contemporary theories	56
5	Models	25
6	Issues in communication theory	24
7	Description of theory building	22
8	Classical theories	21
9	Major concepts	21
10	Evaluation of theories	17
11	History	17
12	Research skills	11
13	Nature of theory	9
14	Functions of theory	9
15	Elements of theory	7
16	Research trends	4
17	Trends	4
18	Themes	3
19	Construction of theories	2
20	Overview of the discipline	1

A third area in communication theory course descriptions, covered, in rank order: orientations, trends, issues, history, research trends, and a disciplinary overview. Orientations to communication theory appeared in course descriptions under a variety of terms: approaches, paradigms, laws, rules, metatheory, bases, perspectives, genres, scientific, humanistic, social scientific, and behavioral. The issues that were mentioned include conceptual (communication, meaning, intent, effectiveness), philosophical, and theoretical. A third focus of the communication theory course, then, is background in the

history, approaches, trends and issues in the communication discipline. The fourth area, theory construction and testing, contained mentions of theory evaluation, research skills, and constructing theories.

Examination of the content areas mentioned in course descriptions suggest that the primary focus of communication theory courses is substantive communication theories with more emphasis on contextual than thematic and on contemporary than classical theories. When the theory course was offered at the lower level the focus on surveying major theories wass even more pronounced. The diversity in course content, then, was primarily in the upper division communication theory courses. These findings support the author's interpretation of Berger's (1991) comments that a common core of various substantive theories be the focus of an undergraduate theory course. That common core is a focus on contemporary and contextual theories. Whether or not a common core of theories is covered, however, can not be determined by this study.

Other areas contained a mixture of definitions, background, evaluation, construction and research skills. Some of the topics that Berger (1991) thought should be included in a graduate theory course, then, were also covered at the undergraduate level; explanation of key concepts, alternative approaches, explication of theoretical constructs, nature of theory construction, theory construction and evaluation. Whether these topics are covered in the same manner in undergraduate and graduate theory courses, however, cannot be determined from this study. The focus on survey or study as a learning goal suggests

that undergraduate theory courses may present and discuss how to conceptualize or construct and evaluate a theory while a graduate course may require students to explicate theoretical constructs and construct and evaluate theories.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Several conclusions about the status of the undergraduate communication theory course can be drawn from this study's results. Hope (1985) and the Speech Communication Association (1991) called for the inclusion of a theory course in the communication curriculum. This study suggests that the communication theory course is gaining acceptance in the communication discipline at both small and large institutions. The course is being offered and required as an upper division course in a growing number of communication programs. More significantly, some departments are now offering both an introductory and an advanced communication theory course. There is also consistency in course titles with Communication Theory being the common term in seventy-five percent or more of the courses.

There is some unity in the course objectives and content areas mentioned in the course descriptions. The most common approach was a survey of substantive, contextual, contemporary theories. The remaining objectives and topics varied significantly. These results echo and/or raise important questions about the material that is and/or should be covered in the undergraduate communication theory course.

These results suggest that there is little by way of a

common core of knowledge that communication students receive in the undergraduate theory course. Berger (1991:102) echoes this conclusion in his comment that there is, "no particular theoretical core to the field of communication." Further evidence for the lack of a common core was an informal content analysis conducted by the author of the topics covered in five communication theory textbooks (Griffin, 1991; Infante, Rancer, & Womack, 1990; Littlejohn, 1990; Stacks, Hickson, & Hill, 1991; Trenholm, 1991). The author found only a small core of common topics and theories/theorists across even three of the textbooks; history, evaluation criteria, laws, rules, systems, Coordinated Management of Meaning Theory, Ekman and Friesen, Mehrabian, Sapir and Whorf, Speech Act Theory, Social Judgment Theory, Uncertainty Reduction Theory, and Weick. There may be, then, little commonality in terms of the content covered in the communication theory course.

A larger issue related to this study is what should communication students receive by way of disciplinary literacy and disciplinary socialization? Does/should studying communication require a basic disciplinary literacy analogous to the "cultural literacy" needed to read a newspaper or a novel? One aspect of literacy is what can/should the undergraduate communication theory course cover. Should the goals of the undergraduate communication theory course concentrate on knowledge (recognition/memorization) of the philosophical approaches and theories/theorists or critical analysis; should students be literate consumers of theory or theory constructors; should students be able to analyze a situation, identify the

communication problem, and suggest remedies? Should/can all these objectives be covered in the or one communication theory course?

Related to whether/what students should receive by way of disciplinary literacy, is at what level should various topics and issues be presented. In other social science disciplines like sociology and psychology the first chapters in the introductory course typically cover the history and founders of the discipline. This study suggests that communication students may not receive this background on their discipline or not receive it until an upper level communication theory course. Second, should the communication theory course be taught at a lower level and provide a background and some elementary analysis, application and consumer skills that students can use as they move through their major? For example, students could learn how to analyze communication problems and suggest remedies or an introduction to system's theory would allow it to be covered more specifically in small group, family, and organizational communication courses. Should a lower or upper level course focus on philosophical underpinnings and/or theory construction/evaluation or should theory construction be reserved for graduate courses?

Conrad (1990:22) states that the point of socialization is to persuade newcomers to accept the attitudes, behaviors, dominant goals, values, and taken-for-granted assumptions of the organization. There are two possible viewpoints on what constitutes appropriate socialization into the communication discipline.

One view is that students who do not share a common content core are being properly socialized into the discipline because the communication discipline itself is fragmented (Berger, 1991). Maybe there is little in terms of shared concerns, goals, and interests constituted through and reflected in the values, beliefs, and practices of the communication discipline. Therefore, whatever common content core communication students receive, may be specific to the major tracks or overall focus of the communication program. Berger (1991) suggests that the fragmentation in the discipline may remain until there is a small set of questions in the field (Berger, 1991). Until that time there may be little agreement concerning what content should be included in the communication theory course.

Another view of disciplinary socialization is that students should understand the various historical traditions, philosophical underpinnings, major issues, and the disciplinary status of communication. Students should know that communication scholars and definitions of communication present different views of intentionality and/or effectiveness. Students should understand why the laws-rules-systems perspectives are an issue in the discipline and recognize that there are other perspectives like Fisher's and the critical perspective. Students should understand that other disciplines, friends and relatives, and employers have various and contradictory views of the status and worth of the communication discipline.

Clearly the status of the introductory communication theory course needs more research and discussion particularly in terms of (1) what is actually covered in the courses as opposed to what

is listed in the course descriptions and (2) what specific theories/theorists, perspectives, and disciplinary knowledge are and/or should be covered in the course. The content covered in the communication theory course also raises larger questions about the communication discipline and what it does or should mean to be literate in and socialized into that discipline.

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Abstract

Given the calls for and concerns about the status of theory instruction in the communication discipline, the purpose of this study was to more systematically assess the status of the undergraduate communication theory course at small and large colleges. An investigation of communication theory course descriptions found that the course is taught at both small and large colleges, but there is little general agreement about what should be covered in the communication theory course beyond a general survey of major theories. This lack of agreement also raises larger issues about the status of the communication discipline and what it does or should mean for students to be literate in and appropriately socialized into the communication discipline.